THIS PLACE IS A MESSAGE: 
A SPATIAL READING OF LAS VEGAS, NEVADA IN SPECULATIVE FICTION

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INTRODUCTION

In 1993, the Department of Energy and Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque, New Mexico assembled an expert panel of researchers, ranging from anthropology to environmental engineering to semiotics. The panel developed and evaluated “markers [to deter] inadvertent human intrusion in the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant,” the design characteristics that would designate Yucca Mountain, 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas, Nevada, as the nation’s nuclear repository. The report didn’t develop mechanisms to contain the radiation and prevent leakage. Instead, it generated ways to convey to future generations the unseen danger posed by a mountain buried with thousands of tons of radioactive material. Because the nuclear waste was estimated to be deadly for 10,000 years, the challenge was to design a “permanent, passive marker system capable of surviving and remaining interpretable for 10,000 years." This report, the birth of nuclear semiotics, established recommendations for designs that would be able to communicate the danger of Yucca Mountain through mediums of meaning beyond “Keep Out” signage and chain links fences, both of which could lose their current meaning in 10,000 years.

The potential presence of nuclear material in this account feels like science fiction, both because of the dangers it poses (radioactive material has produced stories of both post-apocalyptic societies and friendly neighborhood superheroes alike) and because it forces us to speculate on the future. The Sandia report is a kind of speculative fiction; it speculates that Yucca Mountain will be the final repository site for nuclear waste, even as political pressure and legal and logistical challenges hampered final authorization. The report also attempts to speculate on the nature of distant-future populations and their language. “The design of the whole site itself is to be a major source of meaning,” the report says, before translating the non-linguistic framework the design would convey: “This place is a message . . . and part of a system
of messages. . . pay attention to it! Sending this message was important to us. . . . What is here was dangerous and repulsive to us. This message is a warning about danger. The danger is in a particular location” (US Department of Energy). The report adds, “It is not enough to know that this is a place of importance and danger . . . you must know that the place itself is a message, that it contains messages, and is part of a system of messages.” The recommendations for meaning included large spikes, durable shapes for messages to be inscribed on and updated as language changed, and so on. Though the designs are not specifically generated with Yucca Mountain in mind, there is an underlying assumption that southern Nevada would have been the final site. The report indicates the “expected behavior of the site indicates little danger to humans, except for human interference” and utilizes designs that incorporate dry, open desert space, “despite the absence of explicit official plans to use [Yucca Mountain] for this purpose.”

Though none of the recommendations have been integrated into Yucca Mountain, its future as a repository site is still uncertain. In 2017, President Donald Trump asked Congress to approve $120 million to restart licensing activity and move forward with Yucca Mountain’s Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (DiChristoper). By 2019, however, Yucca Mountain was in a “political limbo,” as opponents halted licensing and approval (Martin). With the nation’s nuclear repository plan on hold, the concept and idea of place has centered much of this debate, especially as state, local, business, and tribal leaders communicate the impact of burying nuclear waste at Yucca. Nevadans revisit place as a tool for communicating meaning, particularly in posing the question, “Why southern Nevada?” The answer haunts the messages of nuclear semiotics: “This place is a message . . . and part of a system of messages. . . pay attention to it! Sending this message was important to us.”
Las Vegas, Nevada, a city of desert and sin, is a site for speculation. The well-known mantra “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas” perpetuates the legend of a city of big wins, booze, and good times, encouraging tourists to speculate how they would take advantage of legalized gambling, lavish casino lifestyles, strip clubs, and the city’s promise of discretion. Performers offer tourists a speculative peek into a world where magic could exist and make the impossible happen. Las Vegas is also a victim of financial speculation, the tourist-based economy plummeting after the housing bubble burst in 2008.

Perhaps these intersections of speculative Vegas’s aren’t a coincidence, given the location of Las Vegas. Named for “the meadows,” Las Vegas was originally a warm spring, an oasis, a respite for travelers across the Mohave Desert. What started as a rest stop became a railroad town, a Mob hot spot, a growing city. But soon the needs of the city outpaced the water the desert and its aquifers could supply, leading to the construction of the Hoover Dam to control the Colorado River. The cliffs of Lake Mead are striated, a geological ruler to measure the sinking water levels, reminding boaters where the water used to be. The city of Las Vegas itself relies on speculation for survival, especially as droughts continue throughout the American Southwest. Las Vegas as desert was never intended to sustain itself, so, in order to continue, it must speculate on how it could survive.

Las Vegas as a site for speculative landscapes produces texts engaged with both the cityscape of Las Vegas and the Mojave Desert. Some attempt to peer into futures to predict what Sin City will look like; others imagine alternate presents where magic and illusion exists in a city that claims to make one’s problems disappear. The texts in this project wrestle with the same, essential claim and question: This place, Las Vegas, is a message. What does it mean? For me, this is a personal project. I grew up in Las Vegas, and my experience of living there is so vastly
different from popular movies like *Ocean’s 11* and *The Hangover*. What was even stranger was that—despite its recurrence in popular culture—in the field of literary criticism and cultural studies, Las Vegas was not a “literary city” in the same sense of New York or Los Angeles. “Literary” texts about other cities focused on what it was like to live in and be a “real” resident of NYC or L.A. However, much of the popular culture around Las Vegas told stories of tourists visiting. Often the only glimpses of local Las Vegans (pronounced *las veiɡəns* rather than *las viːɡəns*) were bartenders and dealers. Amanda Fortini, in her piece “The People of Las Vegas,” incisively observes that writing about Las Vegas (more specifically journalistic and non-fiction) is less about the city and more about what the writers project onto the city:

> Writing about Las Vegas is inevitably an extreme case of the problem of travel writing more generally: its practitioners forget that the way to understand a place is to get out and see it, and to talk to its people. . . . Literature should portray, raise questions, and perhaps come to some conclusions about existence, which nobody ever seeks through Las Vegas. People come to Las Vegas looking for their idea of Las Vegas; they don’t come here looking for life.

Much of what I had consumed about Las Vegas relied on stereotypes and rarely depicted the myriad of experiences I had within my hometown. Yes, there were neon signs and green-felted tables and endless distractions, but there was also dry desert air, public schools, twenty-four-hour restaurants, hockey teams, country concerts, shootings, and communities trying to make sense of it all. This project grew out of an attempt to discover what *else* has been written about Las Vegas and understand the message of the place outside of cliché. My project centers the question “How do storytellers represent and speculate Las Vegas in their work?” In reading and writing about the two texts this project focuses on—*The Mirror Thief* by Martin Seay and
*Fallout: New Vegas*, a video game developed by Obsidian Entertainment—I was drawn to the idea of layers. Layers are a way of breaking down an extensive landscape to its parts while recognizing the whole.

My thesis begins by exploring the use of palimpsest in *The Mirror Thief*. The palimpsest, originally an archival term, has been adapted by urban scholars as a way of examining a city’s various layers. By using the palimpsest in my analysis, I argue that Las Vegas through the Strip operates as a unique kind of palimpsest because of the way the Strip evokes past versions of itself through memory, represents other cities in its attractions, and blurs the line between reality and fantasy. In my second chapter, I highlight the way *Fallout: New Vegas*, set in a future post-apocalyptic Las Vegas, represents imperialism and its narratives of progress as identifiable layers in the landscape, as opposed to the totalizing reality imperialism purports itself to be. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in the preface to *Empire*, explain that the idea of imperialism “is characterized fundamentally by a lack of boundaries: Empire’s rules have no limits. . . . No territorial boundaries limit its reign. . . . Empire presents its rule not as a transitory moment in the movement of history, but as a regime with no temporal” (xiv-xv). Scholars like Mary Pat Brady and Aimee Bahng examine how writers of color—Chicana and Asian American, respectively—interrogate imperialism’s supposed occupation of all space and time. While these works are grounded in groups often marginalized, displaced, and abjected by imperialism’s deployment of the power of space, my project proposes to similarly interrogate imperialism through speculated versions of Las Vegas, a city formulated by American imperial expansionism, in order to imagine a new way of conceptualizing space, one that views imperialism as another layer of a landscape of subjectivities, rather than its whole.
Underlining both of these chapters is my engagement with the speculative as a way of opening up what’s been uncovered and imagining alternate histories and possibilities. I was partly drawn to the project of speculative fiction because of the work of Aimee Bahng in *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times*. For her, “Speculative fiction is a genre of inventing other possibilities” (Bahng 8). The work of the speculative is especially important because of its potential to disrupt capitalism’s colonization of the future by imagining alternative worlds and possibilities. I use the term “speculative” to encompass both science fiction speculation (thinking of possible and impossible futures) and fantasy (imagining worlds where magic and the supernatural exist). In terms of this project, even as I read, played, and encountered alternate, speculative versions of Las Vegas—incorporating ecological disaster, vampires, immortal beings, and aliens into my hometown—they were still recognizable as Las Vegas. The speculative is a way of “unseeing” Las Vegas, as I elaborate in Chapter 1, breaking away from stereotyped conceptions. Additionally, reading speculative fiction set in Las Vegas through the lens of layers allows for an understanding of how the speculative works; these texts, because they are set in a “real,” recognizable city, layer the realistic with the speculative to convey a world that is both familiar and unfamiliar. That gap between the familiar and the unfamiliar is where meaning can be found, whether its expanding Las Vegas’s capacity to encompass and remember other cities and times, or reconceptualizing a post-apocalyptic Las Vegas that embodies the possibility of disrupting its imperial foundation.

Broadly, this project examines Las Vegas as, through the language of nuclear semiotics, a space that says, “This place is a message.” The storytellers in this project aren’t just asking, “If Las Vegas is a message, what does it mean?” They’re asking a speculative question: “If Las Vegas is a message, what could it mean?” Both *The Mirror Thief* and *Fallout: New Vegas* pose
contrasting versions of Las Vegas. But, like nuclear semiotics, what Las Vegas communicates may be long-lasting, forgotten, potentially dangerous, and merely fictitious, yet lying deep in the city and landscape, waiting to be excavated.
CHAPTER 1

Spatializing Fantasy

Martin Seay’s 600-page novel *The Mirror Thief*, published in 2016, follows main character Curtis Stone on his journey around Las Vegas. Throughout Curtis’ journey, we see the spatial and temporal layers that make up Las Vegas and complicate a straightforward reading of an otherwise superficial city. One example of this layering is seen in Lake Mead, a manmade reservoir outside of Las Vegas. Geologically, high water marks, which are striations in the rock surrounding the lake, demonstrate sinking water levels at a thirty-year low. These striations mark both the passing of time and the growth of Las Vegas as the city consumes more and more water. While Curtis does venture to the Lake Mead National Recreation Area, he is less interested in the geological formations and more in the ruins below the lake’s surface. With the low water level, Curtis can begin to see the tops of chimneys from an old town submerged under the lake. The town, inhabited by migrant workers, was engulfed by the lake that formed from the Hoover Dam.

Lake Mead is an example of the various layers and their temporal interactions mentioned in *The Mirror Thief*. Geological striations mark both the passage of time and the manmade interaction with the landscape through high water marks. The lake layered onto ruins obscures them until the lake is low enough that the submerged becomes excavated. These images also invoke Venice, another setting in the book, a city under threat of disappearing due to rising ocean levels and human-generated climate change. Even though Lake Mead is separate from Las Vegas, the two are deeply connected; when thinking about Lake Mead, it’s impossible to not consider Las Vegas. I chose to analyze this book because of its convergence of place, memory, and magic through these layers.
Because of these layers, *The Mirror Thief* is difficult to summarize and review succinctly. The *Chicago Review of Books* describes it as “the weirdest and most ambitious novel of 2016 thus far … a literary, speculative, mystical masterwork set in three different versions of Venice (Italy, California, and Las Vegas) during three different time periods (16th century, mid-20th, early 21st)” and selected Seay for their Best Debut 2016 Chirby Award (Morgan). The structure of *The Mirror Thief* is tripartite:

1. Disabled Gulf War veteran Curtis takes on a job from fellow veteran Damon, to find Stanley Glass, a family friend and successful gambler, rumored to be hiding on the Strip in Las Vegas. During his search, Curtis discovers Stanley was part of a card counting team with Damon, hitting casinos in Atlantic City. Stanley disappeared with the money after the scheme went sideways. Damon attempts to track down the rest of the team to keep them from going to the authorities and take the money for himself.

2. Stanley Glass, back when he was a teenage con artist, travels cross-country to track down the mysterious Adrian Welles, author of cryptic narrative poem *The Mirror Thief* (for which the novel is named for). Welles lives in Venice Beach, California at the height of the Beatnik era. Stanley searches for Welles so he can learn the secret behind “real” magic, not the illusions places like the Strip try to sell.

3. Vettor Crivano, a 16th-century alchemist, smuggles mirror-makers from Venice, Italy at the height of public fascination and distrust of mirrors and their eerie reflections. He eventually escapes Venice, supposedly with an enchanted mirror.

These stories intertwine with one another, complicating a straightforward summary. Curtis encounters Crivano through Stanley’s copy of *The Mirror Thief*. Stanley searches for some semblance of 16th-century Venice in Venice Beach. Crivano, like Curtis, struggles to put
his life back together, haunted by and injured from their war duty. The three stories, though they span different characters, places, and times, are interconnected. Because of the interrelatedness of the story, we see layers of the other cities in the Las Vegas sections: as Curtis searches for Stanley, young Stanley searches for Welles and Crivano searches for the mirror-makers; as Curtis stays at the Venetian with its imitation belltower and Rialto Bridge, Stanley walks the streets and canals of Venice Beach and Crivano marvels at the newly constructed Rialto Bridge in Venice; both Curtis and young Stanley find maps of Old World Venice. At the conclusion of the novel, Stanley and Crivano escape their deaths by slipping into a mirror using magic.

The interconnected narratives offer a variety of readings. Many reviewers wrestle with *The Mirror Thief*’s hefty size and pastiche, comparing Seay to Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Saul Bellow, James Ellory, and Umberto Eco. Scarlett Thomas describes the novel “as ‘Stone Junction’ rewritten by David Foster Wallace or Thomas Pynchon. . . . ‘The Da Vinci Code’ for intellectuals. . . . like ‘Howl’ translated into Latin and then back again.” Thomas also emphasizes the role and act of reading *The Mirror Thief* as an exercise of “hermeneutics and disappointment.” Whereas for Michael Schaub, reading is a source of magic, both in the plot and in the experience of reading it. Mark Lawson identifies the main impulse of the novel as reflective, dealing with mirrors, illusions, and echoes, particularly in the ways historical contexts and cities reflect each other.

Marshall Yarbrough, like me, is interested in Seay’s use of cities, particularly “the city as it is reflected in other cities.” For Yarbrough, the city is one part of the overall theme:

Venice’s true identity is as hard to pin down as Crivano’s, and in the Venice chapters comes the fullest elaboration of the book’s central theme: the mirror and what it reflects, true knowledge duplicated infinitely, lost in a never-ending mise-en-abyme. . . . And yet
the characters’ heroism lies in their refusal to be satisfied with illusion—their determination to get behind the mirror. In this refusal lies the hope that the city, if only just the idea of it, endures.

While I don’t dispute Yarbrough’s reading, the emphasis on illusion and simulation discounts the importance of the physical experience of place in the text. Even as Curtis knows he may be searching for the ghost of Stanley in Las Vegas, the Strip is a physical place experienced by locals and tourists alike. In searching the Strip, the simulated may be embraced, but the original isn’t forgotten; maps of the Old World are present in the lobby of The Venetian, reminding Curtis of the “actual” Venice. However, my reading of The Mirror Thief adds to Yarbrough’s reading; rather than focusing on Venice, which produces a reading of city and illusion, I focus on Las Vegas as a layered cityscape, made up of other times and places like Venice. My reading also departs from the critical discussion, partly because of my project’s focus on Las Vegas, but also to incorporate the fantastic into my analysis. I focus on Las Vegas, not because I think Seay actively develops an argument about Las Vegas, but because I’m interested in why and how he used Las Vegas as a setting (and, as Yarbrough points out, almost a character itself). By using Las Vegas, Seay invites us to identify and understand the complexity of place. Las Vegas and Venice Beach are more than coincidental clones of Venice; they are cities with their own unique identities and layers. Additionally, Las Vegas is used to highlight the intersection of place and

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1 “On the wall behind the registration desk hangs an old-style perspective map: a turkeyleg [sic] island viewed from midair, imagined onto paper by some ancient earthbound cartographer, now repurposed by hotshot design consultants into this great gilded frame. Swarmed by tall ships, crowded with palaces and domed churches, bristling with belltowers [sic] and spires. The blue reverse-S of a canal slashes through its thick western end. . . . Curtis stares at the map for a long time before he realizes that he’s looking for Stanley there, expecting to spot him loitering in a tiny piazza, smirking. The clerks at the desk are eyeing Curtis nervously. He shakes his head, turns to go” (Seay 32-33).
the fantastic because Seay’s kind of magic is different than the illusions offered by the Strip and emphasizes a reading of Las Vegas that is more than its stereotypes.

The intersection of place and fantasy are important here because Seay uses magic as a way to highlight and complicate space. For example, older Stanley, in between the Venice Beach and Las Vegas sections, has figured out how to travel through mirrors, and even visits Curtis in his hotel room’s mirror. Though magic is alluded to in the other sections, it is only practiced in Las Vegas; we hear of magic and its potential throughout the novel, but we see it in action in Curtis’ sections. By focusing on Seay’s representation of Las Vegas, we see how Seay employs fantasy to collapse and complicate space by bridging the three cities together. Venice, Venice Beach, and Las Vegas connect together and form layers of each other, even across time and space, made apparent through the lens of fantasy. In this chapter, I turn to the concept of palimpsest to understand the complex relationality between Seay’s depiction of these cities, grounded in a reading of fantasy made apparent in the representation of Las Vegas.

Understanding Las Vegas means working through memory, space, time, and the fantastic. I conclude by promoting a reading of urban palimpsests that recognizes the fantastic as a potential layer, made possible in this chapter by examining Seay’s Las Vegas.

The Strip as Urban Palimpsest

Space is an important element of the novel because it explores the relationality between Venice and its versions across time and space. The spatial turn in literary and cultural studies suggests that a spatial reading elucidates and expands our understanding of a text or artifact, drawing from movements like poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and postmodernism. The spatial turn has led to a proliferation of interesting postmodern approaches to literary criticism and cultural studies, such as literary cartography, literary geography, geocriticism, urban studies,
and non-place studies. However, *The Mirror Thief* blocks an easy read of place and space. Apparent in summary and reviews alone, place is complex and interwoven, partly because of the way the novel is structured to simulate the structure of cities. Christian Gutleben untangles a complex temporal structure in Penelope Lively’s *City of the Mind* and observes that “the structure of the city reflects or inspires the structure of the novel [and] is also evident in the presentation of the city’s temporal layout according to which ‘centuries and decades rub shoulders in a disorder that denies the sequence of time’” (66). Just as in Lively’s London, Seay’s Las Vegas, as it “rubs shoulders” with other cities and times, necessitates the tripartite structure to emphasize the connectedness between the three cities. In other words, *The Mirror Thief* is more than a contrived observation about how two American cities draw inspiration from Venice. No city exists in a singular temporality, but instead must be understood as its “disorder” of time, and, as Seay argues, of space. Venice Beach and Las Vegas are cities that “rub shoulders” with ideas of Venice.

Seay challenges a simple reading of place, of only identifying the commonalities between Venice, Venice Beach, and Las Vegas, by complicating how space is approached in literary criticism. Robert T. Tally Jr. summarizes the approach and appeal of spatiality:

The map is one of the most powerful and effective means humans have to make sense of their place in the world. . . . In a manner of speaking, literature also functions as a form of mapping, offering its readers descriptions of places, situating them in a kind of imaginary space, and providing points of reference by which they can orient themselves and understand the world in which they live in. Or maybe literature helps readers get a sense of the worlds in which others have lived, currently live, or will live in times to come. (2)
If mapping in literature helps us make sense of space, Seay deliberately poses Las Vegas as a place that is difficult to orient: “It’s like being [in Las Vegas] in the flesh is tangling him up—like the place itself is blocking the idea of the place” (31). Curtis, in his search for Stanley, is drawn to The Venetian, though he’s unsure why. Representational mapping isn’t enough to understand these cities, specifically Las Vegas. There is something “blocking” a straightforward conception of place in the novel. *The Mirror Thief* begins with Curtis navigating the Strip and maps out Curtis’s location in a neat bit of exposition that orients the reader and marks the strangeness of time and place: “A little farther up the Strip the pirates are at it again: their last cannons boom as the taxi drops him at the curb, and he crosses the Rialto Bridge to the sound of distant applause” (7). There is a strange layering of place here; pirates are in earshot of the Rialto Bridge, which is all accessible by taxi—the lawlessness of a pirate ship, the architectural marvel of Venice, and the orderliness of urban space—all places that have never historically coexisted on the same accessible piece of asphalt. Curtis’ mapping of the Strip, while taking into account the physical locations and proximity of different casinos and attractions, emphasizes a unique conception of Las Vegas. Las Vegas isn’t a single city, but rather a multiplicity of spaces and temporalities, converged together.

Michel de Certeau in his essay “Walking the City” highlights the convergence of space and time and links them through subjectivity and memory. He contrasts the view someone would have of New York City from the top of the World Trade Center versus someone walking the streets (like, in terms of Curtis’ perspective, the view from The Venetian versus pulling up to the curb of Las Vegas Boulevard). While the watcher would have a better view of the city as a whole, they simply view New York from a removed, incomplete perspective, unable to recognize subjectivity from above. de Certeau equates incompleteness with the lack of ability to understand
and impact the city below. It is the walkers, those who can’t see the city in its entirety but interact with it locally, who “write” the city-text by walking it. In that sense, walkers have a more complete understanding of the city and its layers (5). What distinguishes the walkers from the watchers is that the walkers create an urban palimpsest by tying memory to the city through the stories they tell: “The dispersion of stories points to the dispersion of the memorable as well. And in fact memory is a sort of anti-museum: it is not localizable. Fragments of it come out in legends. . . . ‘Here, there used to be a bakery.’ ‘That’s where old lady Dupuis used to live’” (108). A city is written by its walkers, a “patchwork quilt of individual viewpoints and opinions,” traces of the past—memories—inscribed onto physical locations.

Seay continues to map the Strip through Curtis’ perspective, but is interrupted by a memory of a past trip. Amid Curtis’s view, the sight of the canal invokes the memory of Stanley, simultaneously watcher and walker:

Curtis switches off the overhead lights, looks out at the view: Harrah’s and the Mirage down the Strip, the belltower and turquoise canal below. A flash of memory, from three years ago: Stanley’s leaning on the balustrade above the moored gondolas. Tweed driver cap cocked on his bony head. Stirring the air with small gnarled hands. . . . Something like that. Before Curtis can get a fix on it, it’s gone. (8-9)

Here we see where the strange space of the Strip from another dimension, that of Curtis’s past memories of the place. But the memories, although spatial, are fleeting, fragmentary, incomplete. They don’t present a more complete picture of Curtis, the Strip, or his relationship with the city. Here, it is the strange temporality associated with the Strip that blocks a straightforward conception of space.
David Harvey frames the process of walkers “writing” a city in this way:

“Postmodernism cultivates, instead, a conception of the urban fabric as necessarily fragmented, a ‘palimpsest’ of past forms superimposed upon each other, and a ‘collage’ of current uses, many of which may be ephemeral. . . . The metropolis is impossible to command except in bits and pieces” (66). The postmodern city must be understood as fragmented, compounding the “past forms” and “current uses.” The subjectivities of the walkers, according to Harvey, include “vernacular traditions, local histories, particular wants, needs, and fancies [which then generate] specialized, even highly customized architectural forms” (Harvey 66). Cities are more than their present state; they are remnants of previous places, past versions of the city, constructed and destroyed buildings, residents, immigrants, histories, stories, subjectivities linked to structures.

de Certeau identifies the fragmented urban fabric of time and space as a palimpsest. Here, the archival term “palimpsest” adds to an understanding of place, one that takes into account the strange temporality of both the Strip and the intertwining narrative structure. Seay adds to our understanding of place by posing Las Vegas, not just a space of layered cityscapes, but of temporalities as well. Originally, a palimpsest referred to a physical, written object, like text on vellum, in which the material had been reused or altered while maintaining traces of earlier writing—in other words, a kind of multilayered record. These remaining, overwritten records often have great historical value, as many ancient works survive only as palimpsests. For example, the Archimedes Palimpsest was originally a 10th-century Byzantine-Greek copy of works of mathematician Archimedes of Syracuse but was partly erased and overwritten with Christian religious texts by monks in the 13th century. Because the parchment was imperfectly erased, portions of Archimedes work were recoverable, using ultraviolet, infrared, and X-ray to view the original text. When the palimpsest manuscript sold for $2 million, Nigel Wilson, the
professor who prepared the manuscript for auction, noted that, while the present manuscript—the Greek liturgical book—had “no obvious claim to be regarded as possessing special significance,” the Archimedes palimpsest was “derived from a uniquely important manuscript . . . one of the most valuable surviving documents for tracing the history of Greek mathematics and engineering” (89). Sarah Dillon even goes as far as to claim that “the practice of medieval palimpsesting in fact paradoxically preserved “previously unknown transcriptions of Archimedes’ work, as well as unknown speeches by prominent politician of the time Hyperides (11-13). Because of the palimpsest, both layers are preserved and, through certain methodologies, legible.

Since then, the palimpsest as a concept has taken on metaphoric meanings. Thomas de Quincey is credited as one of the first essayists to apply palimpsest as a critical metaphor. In *Suspira de Profundis* he compares memory and the human mind as a kind of palimpsest: “What else than a natural and mighty palimpsest is the human brain? . . . Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly as light. Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet in reality not one has been extinguished” (18). Similarly, in 1984, George Orwell emphasizes the power of language and constructed history in a not-too-distant future: “All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and re-inscribed exactly as often as necessary.” While Orwell’s use of palimpsest is particularly grim within his dystopian fiction, it establishes the way intangible history can be scraped and re-inscribed, highlighting the way palimpsests can be leveraged as a kind of lens in across fields.² Sarah Dillon traces palimpsest as

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² In his introduction to anthology on palimpsest, George Bornstein writes, "To us the idea of palimpsest functioned as a master metaphor for many areas of interdisciplinary concern, including the nature of authorship, the contingency of textuality, the process of cultural transmission, and the embedding of art in society" (5). There are various debates within palimpsest studies about how exactly to use palimpsest as a lens, whether as interdisciplinary reading (Dillon), hypertextuality (Genette), or an editing tool (Bornstein). On the multiplicity of approaches to and using palimpsests, Dillon observes that “writing
an interdisciplinary tool. “Disciplines encounter each other in and on the palimpsest, and their relationality becomes defined by its logic,” she says. “In this way, the palimpsest becomes a figure for interdisciplinarity—for the productive violence of the involvement, entanglement, interruption and inhabitation of disciplines in and on each other” (2). I find the interdisciplinarity of palimpsest particularly useful as a way to bring together disparate and sometimes contradictory layers. Palimpsests allows us to examine these layers, both individually and in their messy involvement.

Because of its interdisciplinary nature, urban studies scholars have applied palimpsests to cities, using the metaphor to understand cities as multilayered records, maintain traces of physical history, and bring together literary criticism and architecture. Andreas Huyssen wrote about “urban palimpsest” as a tool to understand how “literary techniques of reading historically, intertextually, constructively and deconstructively at the same time can be woven into our understanding of urban spaces as lived spaces that shape our collective imaginaries” (7). If to read for place is, to quote Tim Cresswell, “a way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world. . . [then when] we look at the world as a world of places we see different things. We see attachments and connections between people and place” (11). Palimpsests emphasize time as an integral dimension to understanding urban space. More precisely, palimpsests can “be fruitfully used to discuss configurations of urban spaces and their unfolding in time” (Huyssen 7). When

about the palimpsest becomes an act of palimpsesting: any new text about the palimpsest erases, superimposes itself upon, and yet is still haunted by, the other texts in the palimpsest’s history. Writing about the palimpsest is a process of writing on the palimpsest—of partaking in its history and of adding another layer to the involution of texts that characterizes that history. Moreover, the palimpsest’s perpetual openness to new inscription ensures that this history will be constantly rewritten” (9). Writing about palimpsests inevitably means encountering the layers of the concept of palimpsest itself, which, while not a direct issue in this chapter, inevitably haunts it.
examining a place, reading for palimpsests allows us to see not just the current physical attributes, but to also read the remains, erasures, layers, and tensions between layers.

Las Vegas, more specifically the Strip, operates as a palimpsest within *The Mirror Thief*. To say that Las Vegas is a palimpsest isn’t a particularly peculiar claim, as many palimpsestuous scholars examine cities as and within texts. However, it can be argued that Las Vegas, especially when compared to cities like London, Istanbul, and Lahore, is a relatively “young” city. Therefore, its palimpsest is comparatively shallow, operating within a century of history rather than centuries. However, Las Vegas as a place has existed as long as other older cities, occupied by tribes like the Paiute and Anasazi. When engaging with Las Vegas, as highlighted in the reading of Lake Mead at the beginning of the chapter, we must engage with the landscape that surrounds in, a landscape that is in constant relationality with the city and also was part of a pattern of overwritten native histories, erased so that the American West could exist. The palimpsest then allows us to see Las Vegas through its depth beyond popular depictions of the Strip and read it as a palimpsest, recognizing the hidden, overwritten layers.

The structure of *The Mirror Thief* and its use of present tense also generates some of its palimpsestic flavor by collapsing time and space. Specifically, I argue that Las Vegas is a peculiar palimpsest, not just of subjectivities and past memories of its walkers, but of other cities as well. The memories and subjectivities of the walkers of the Strip draw not just from past versions of Las Vegas but from the representations of other places generated by casinos and from the speculative production of imagining oneself in those other places and times. The layering and collapsing located in Las Vegas is temporal, spatial, and even fantastic. To ground this point in a

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3 See Avciogul, Glover, and Gutleben for their respective work on urban palimpsests in Istanbul, Lahore, and London.
text, I return to *The Mirror Thief* the novel to read Las Vegas as more than a tourist destination by the way Seay layers three different cities, times, and characters and, in the next section, highlights the fantastic component of Las Vegas, operating across time and space.

Little work has been done on Las Vegas as palimpsest. Those who do link palimpsest and Las Vegas tend to focus on the architecture of the Strip, particularly in the work of architectural scholars Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour in *Learning from Las Vegas*, which broke ground for new architectural methodologies and fostered the postmodern art movement. However, perhaps the lack of Vegas-centered palimpsest scholarship is because the similarities between the Strip and palimpsest are deceptively obvious. One merely has to be aware of the Strip to see palimpsest. The Neon Museum, also referred to as the Neon Graveyard, is an outdoor “museum” that collects, preserves, and exhibits “iconic Las Vegas signs.” Many of the neon signs residing in the museum’s Main Collection are past fixtures of the Strip, many of which were highlighted in *Learning from Las Vegas*, such as the Hacienda, Stardust, Aladdin, and Riviera. But these places have since been imploded to make way for newer resorts and attractions, such as the Hacienda and Aladdin making way for Mandalay Bay and Planet Hollywood, while others are parking lots, convention centers, or vacant plots. The Neon Museum operates as a kind of palimpsest, even as the buildings on the Strip are erased and re-inscribed, remnants of the past still remain, its traces preserved and legible. Curtis, even while searching for Stanley, is cognizant of these traces on the Strip, and these remnants also pose a challenge to Curtis’ conceptualization of the city:

He keeps getting distracted by the city, by landmarks translating out of the grid. From this height, the cleared lot where the Desert Inn used to be gaps like a knocked-out tooth. He spots his hotel where the Strip bends due south, its belltower a pale finger laid across
Caesar’s brilliant readerboard. Flying in Thursday morning, Curtis was able to catch a glimpse of the Luxor, New York, Mandalay Bay, but he couldn’t make out much on the north end; the drop was too quick. (293)

For Curtis, the Strip is its landmarks, both past and present. The Desert Inn, imploded and cleared away, persists in Curtis’ map of the area, a palimpsest that simultaneously remembers the empty lot and the Desert Inn. The description “like a knocked-out tooth” even evokes a sense that this lot will be filled in with a new attraction, anticipating how his current present will soon be overwritten again.

In *The Mirror Thief*, these remnants of the past aren’t limited to Strip-specific locations like the Desert Inn. As Curtis walks down the Strip, he sees the Eiffel Tower:

The Eiffel Tower pokes up from the middle of the next block, beyond the telescoping entrance to Bally’s. The last time Curtis came to town it was still brand new, and he and . . . a bunch of other guys [went] to check it out. Very weird place. Lots of fake trees and blurry Monet carpet, and everything smelled like baguettes. Standard-issue fake casino sky everywhere, even over the gaming floor. (254-55)

In this passage, we see years and places “rubbing shoulders” (to repeat Lively’s earlier quote) with the present as Curtis walks through the Strip. The sight of the Eiffel Tower reminds Curtis of his previous trip, when “Paris” was “brand new,” despite Paris as a city predating Las Vegas. Time is blurred in the memory itself, with the casino’s use of painted skies over the gaming floor to generate the illusion of constant daylight and distort the passage of time. These temporal layers are very palimpsestic. The Paris Casino, to Curtis, is both what it presently is—a landmark, both in a map and monument sense—and what it once was—new, timeless, strange, blurry. What’s unique about Las Vegas is the Strip and what’s unique about the Strip is the way
it incorporates the “ideas” of other cities. Even though Curtis had never been to Paris, he still identified aspects of the casino that marked it as Parisian: the Eiffel Tower, trees, Monet carpet, the scent of baguettes. But Curtis is never under the impression that he is in Paris, as he qualifies the trees and painted casino sky as “fake.” The Strip hosts the “memories” of other cities—though “memories” in this instance is less a personal recollection and more a cultural recognition. Just as the Las Vegas palimpsest preserves remnants of the past, it also generates palimpsests of other cities, or the cultural “ideas” of those cities. To think about Las Vegas as a palimpsest inevitably means encountering the palimpsests of other cities. This is especially apparent when contrasted with other cities. Curtis, on a walk along the Strip, observes,

Crossing Harmon now. New York ahead on the right. Stanley grew up in the shadow of those buildings: AT&T, Century, Chrysler, Seagram, Empire State. What does he think when he sees them? What does he remember? (255)

The shift from the Harmon Hotel on the Strip to the New York-New York Hotel and Casino to actual New York City happens one after the other. But, even as Curtis is trying to anticipate Stanley’s subjectivity, he highlights prominent New York City landmarks. However, it isn’t clear whether Stanley is thinking of the actual New York cityscape (where Stanley was born) or the Strip’s facsimiles (where Stanley honed his gambling craft). It is impossible to untangle Las Vegas and the Strip from the places it represents. The Strip, as a palimpsest, encompasses both the past and present temporalities of Las Vegas and simultaneous representation of other cities. Rather than presenting the Strip as the stereotypical Sin City, Seay instead infuses the city with magic, exposing the various places and temporalities it encompasses and invites walkers to experience.
The Mirror: Mimetic Surface and Fantastic Palimpsest

As mentioned earlier, many of the reviews of *The Mirror Thief* didn’t acknowledge the fantastic elements of the novel due to its subtlety. Additionally, magic is discussed more in the sections featuring Venice and Venice Beach than Las Vegas, perhaps suggesting Vegas is a less magical city. However, there are traces of magic in and around Las Vegas, which Curtis encounters and doesn’t fully recognize. In one of his excursions off the Strip, Curtis ventures to the desert in his search. After learning about Stanley’s involvement in Atlantic City, Curtis is stranded at Lake Mead National Recreation Area and makes his way to the visitor center by crossing the desert and experiences a moment of the fantastic while looking at the desert:


Spineless marine creatures. A human figure with a bird’s beaked head. (325).

This passage challenges the notion that the desert is lifeless and identifies a palimpsestic and fantastic element to the desert. Though the flora and fauna on Curtis’s walk was limited to creosote bushes and rabbits, the rock formations “look organic, alive,” suggesting the presence of a kind of magic, one that animates the inanimate. The shapes of the rocks allow Curtis to perceive images with haunting reminders. The “spineless marine creatures,” though they may seem a strange sight for a desert, serve as a palimpsest, a fragment from the geological time. 520 million years ago, ancient seas submerged most of contemporary California and western Nevada. The movement of the ocean created sedimentary rock formations, including stratified sediment layers. The “human figure with a bird’s beaked head” also references southern Nevada’s past by
invoking the Thunderbird, a mythological figure shared by many Native Americans tribes, including those displaced from the southern Nevada.

Though it seems like magic is present in animating these rocks, it is the speculative that brings the desert to life, gestures to layers overwritten, and speaks of the history of the landscape. Though speculation is often used in reference to the future, fantasy is a kind of speculation because it imagines alternative futures and pasts with magic. Magic itself is a broad term, but in *The Mirror Thief*, magic is a power that can be accessed to perform acts beyond human ability, though often without the explanation provided in many science fiction texts. I also want to emphasize the past-facing nature of fantasy; just as science fiction looks to the future and technology to speculate, *The Mirror Thief* looks as three past moments and reimagines those times and places, speculating on what would happen if someone had the ability to traverse time and space.

Seay uses the Las Vegas Strip to exemplify the patterns and layers that make magic possible by grounding it in the mysticism of the mirror. Unlike popular conceptions of fantasy novels as a genre, *The Mirror Thief* isn’t depicting an entirely new world to escape from or even an alternate universe where magic is possible. Instead, Seay uses fantasy as a way to augment the familiar scenes of the Strip, Venice Beach, and Venice with magic to call attention to the patterns between them. Kathryn Hume describes speculative, fantasy-augmented worlds as especially rich because they, rather than presenting an entirely fictitious world, instead infuse otherwise mundane details of everyday life with the fantastic. This is demonstrated in Curtis observing the rock formations that looked organic and alive, taking the shape of ancient animals and deities. This “succeeds in enticing us to explore and enjoy those differences [so] we can compare a new reality with our own” (84). Rather than recreating entirely new realities, Seay augments our
world with subtle fantasy, with limited demonstrations of magic. This subtle fantasy allows for magic to be inscribed onto our reality, forming a palimpsestic layer on how we understand Las Vegas as a place.

I draw from Kathryn Hume’s working definitions of mimesis and fantasy and see the mirror operating within both formulations; mimesis is “felt as the desire to imitate, to describe events, people, situations, and objects with such verisimilitude that others can share your experience” and fantasy is “the desire to change givens and later reality,” a definition that is intentionally open and flexible (20). Hume explores the various intersections of fantasy literature with mimetic impulses, and so she recognizes many works are neither solely mimetic or fantastic but are “a characteristic blend or range of blends of the two impulses” (20). The mirror is an important element of the novel, both because it is signaled in the title, but also because it both a mimetic and fantastic device. The fantastic elements of the novel are centered on the mirror, which operates as its own type of palimpsest.

A mirror is made up of layers. In Crivano’s section, he orchestrates the production of an enchanted mirror: “the fabrication of mirrors is a complex undertaking, one that requires the labor of at least two specialists: a glassmaker conversant with formulae and techniques to yield a crystalline substance of near-perfect transparency, along with a silverer able to shape that material into flat sheets backed with a reflective alloy” (177). These layers are more than just physical, though. In the most basic sense, mirrors work by reflecting nearby images exactly. Characters throughout the three stories use mirrors. Cab drivers watch Curtis through their rearview mirrors. The windows of his hotel room are mirrored windows. There are “silver mirror[s] framed in crystal” available for sale at a gift shop at The Venetian. Young Stanley uses old copies of a tabloid *Mirror-News* as kindling. Various characters use mirrors to check their
reflections, write messages on condensation collected on mirrors, and reflect light to draw someone’s attention. The fascination with mirrors in Crivano’s day was with the perfect representation of a face in its glass and the alchemical and philosophical potential to reveal the true nature of a reflection.

However, mirrors in *The Mirror Thief* are more than reflective, mimetic surfaces; they are tools that expose and enchant. Throughout the novel, specifically in Curtis’ sections, Stanley uses the mirror as a means of transportation to visit Curtis and escape Damon, atypical uses of a mirror. It is only with Stanley’s character that we hear of the actual practice of magic. Veronica, his card counting partner, tells Curtis that Stanley is skilled gambler but doesn’t count cards and instead relies on what she calls mysticism in order to affect the card games. For Stanley, it’s not mysticism, but rather observing patterns. When he first tracks down Welles and asks him to teach him the kind of magic present in *The Mirror Thief*, Welles responds that the poem is fictional, and that magic isn’t real. Stanley responds, “I have read your goddamn book many, many times. . . . I know magic ain’t about sawing ladies in half, or telling the future, or changing Coca-Cola into 7-Up. I know it’s about seeing a pattern in everything. I want you to show me how” (385). After years of training himself to identify these patterns, Stanley is able to manipulate the odds of games of chance.

Though Seay doesn’t provide a step-by-step representation of Stanley’s process of using magic to manipulate chance, he does center magic onto the motif of the mirror. Stanley’s description of the mirror illustrates the relationship between mirrors and magic:

On the wall opposite the window is the mirror. Big, in a heavy wood frame. Nothing special about it. More than adequate to your needs. In some crazy way, it’s what started everything. What does a mirror look like? What color is it? Who ever really looks at
one—and how would you, anyway? You know when it’s there, sure. But do you ever really see it? Sort of like God. Or maybe not. But that’s the mirror, all right. Invisible commonplace. Machine for unseeing. That’s pretty much what you’ve wanted all along: to see the mirror. Only that. (2-3)

The idea of that a mirror lets one “unsee” is repeated throughout Stanley and Crivano’s sections and expands on its fantastic aspect. The ability to “unsee” is treated as fantastic because to unsee is to see the mirror itself, an impossible feat. However, to see the mirror is to understand its reflections. This idea is also repeated at the end of the novel, when Stanley enters to mirror and encounters Crivano.

And the magic mirror, of course: the trick he taught you. To meditate upon the talisman—to gaze upon the mirror’s surface—is to arrange your mind to resemble the mind of God. You pass through the silvering, beyond all earthly torment, into the realm of pure idea. At last, all mysteries become clear. . . . But you are indeed a mirror, Crivano will say. And I, a stranger to myself, would be seen by no one. That is all I ask, and far more than I deserve. The pillar of smoke will blot the moon; the flames will rise to erase him. The ship will burn to the waterline: hissing, then sunken, silent. Once the sky has cleared, the sea will betray nothing. The Mirror Thief will be gone. So, in the end, only we two will remain: you and the ocean, you and the mirror, you and the story you’ve dreamed. (580)

The repetition of the idea that mirrors allow unseeing bookends the novel. Even as the stories intertwine with one another, The Mirror Thief begins and ends with a mirror. This also generates a cyclical nature to the story; it begins and ends the same way. All three stories arrive at the same conclusion, to Stanley disappearing into the mirror.
Seay conceptualizes a mirror as a tool akin to a palimpsest by evoking the language of layering and unseeing. A mirror is made up of layers, both physical—layers of glass and silver—but also subjective. Characters, in watching their reflections, encounter memories of their past, young reflections. The mirror’s ability to unsee also calls attention to other layers not addressed by urban palimpsests. In the passage quoted above, the mirror trick involves passing through the mirror “beyond all earthly torment, into the realm of pure idea” (580). These two realms—that of earth and “our” reality and the realm of pure thought—are palimpsestic of each other. They are layers; our physical world is obvious and the other, the realm of ideas, is hidden, underwritten, but still present in fragments through mirrors. The mirror, then, is the palimpsest fragment that allows for slippage from one layer or world into the next. Though Stanley uses the mirror as a way to collapse space and travel from a hotel in Venice to Curtis’ room at The Venetian, he is able to do so by slipping into the other realm:

It’s not easy, but you’ve practiced. Quick trips at first: a few seconds, in and out. Then longer stretches, deep dives into un-space. Not unlike learning how to swim. What you recall from the other side is the hugeness of it. And the unity: coming back, the idea of separateness becomes laughable. If passing through is hard; returning is much harder. Because, why bother, frankly?

But you do come back. Surfacing in Curtis’s suite, in Veronica’s room, in the suite at Walter’s joint. Letting people see you when you got confident enough. Their startled reactions proving that what you felt was true. (576-577)

Magic, as seen through the mirror, can be read as a layer of Las Vegas, exposing the hidden, magical layers of place not addressed by a traditional reading of urban palimpsests. While reading Stanley’s navigation around the city, I was struck by the kind of details he
includes that other texts set in Las Vegas left out, such as the Mormon Temple on the mountains, the ruins submerged under Lake Mead, and the blooming ocotillo in the desert after a rainstorm. And, besides Stanley briefly visiting him the mirror, Curtis’ time in Las Vegas is devoid of the fantastic. Even Stanley’s visitation is written off as a phantom face, a recurrence of his post-Gulf War PTSD, rather than a fantastic encounter. But the repetition of the mirror, in both its mundane and fantastic forms, represents the fragment of another realm, underscoring that, in the world of *The Mirror Thief*, magic is always present, just as a hidden, subtle layer among many other layers and fragments. By reading magic as an additional layer to the world of *The Mirror Thief*, one that is inscribed on top of our expectations of the world, we can read fantasy as a layer of the palimpsest of Las Vegas, one that binds other cities to it. Seay integrates fantasy into the novel so that readers hold two different versions of Las Vegas in their heads, the one they know and the fantastic one infused with magic. A city is not just its physical location. It’s an idea. And often, especially in the case of Venice, these ideas are palimpsestic of other cities. By speculating on what mirror allows Stanley to “unsee,” Seay imagines the essence or idea of a city. Rather than the stereotypes or expectations of a place, the speculated mirror reflects back a multilayered city, a Las Vegas not just of casinos and vice, but of memory and forgetting, past and future, mundane and fantastic, a distinct cultural identity and a collage of other cities’ landmarks.
CHAPTER 2

The American Frontier, Science Fiction, and *Fallout: New Vegas*

The history of the American West is grounded in imperialism. American expansion westward, in particular, was seen as “manifest destiny,” inevitable and divinely ordained. The term was penned by John L. O’Sullivan in 1845, when he wrote that the annexation of Texas was “the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions” (Black). Legislation, such as the Northwest Ordinance, enacted rules that codified and encouraged westward expansion. 19th century American foreign policy also prioritized expansion throughout North America. The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 doubled the land area of the United States and the Seward Purchase of Alaska in 1867 extended the border even further. Wars also were perpetuated to conquer territory, as seen in the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, and the Spanish-American War (O’Neil).

Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis—arguing that the United States’ cultural distinctiveness comes from the frontier and “colonization of the Great West”—emphasizes the role of the frontier, the horizon, the space yet-to-be-conquered in the American experience. This distinct American identity came from citizens living on the frontier, which supposedly generated universal American traits like acuteness, inquisitiveness, inventiveness, individualism, and “buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom.” However, Turner mourned the death of the frontier with the end of American expansionism. Literary critic Hillary A. Jones points out that the frontier myth “requires an ever-expanding horizon with new vistas for flux and change . . . [as the] national identity requires its horizons be continually expanding” (232). As the frontiers of the American West became fully explored, writers turned their imaginations to other kinds of frontiers. David Mogen agrees, saying, “Indeed, frontier mythology provides a
continuity that connects many disparate forms of American writing. . . . The frontier has simply moved from physical space to other frontiers” (19). Science fiction attempts to displace American expansionist imperialism from already-conquered land and project it onto other conceptual frontiers, such as outer space (best articulated by the Star Trek tagline, “Space: the final frontier”) and alternate timelines.

One space where the American West, imperialism, and science fiction intersect is in the video game Fallout: New Vegas, developed by Obsidian as the fourth installment of a series of post-apocalyptic games. The video game is set in an alternate future version of the Mojave Desert, decades after the United States was devastated by nuclear war. New Vegas employs the frontier by extending it through time, into the future of an alternate universe, grounding the game in both Las Vegas, a physical site of imperialism, and the future, a site imperialism constantly attempts to colonize. This chapter explores how Fallout: New Vegas constitutes space in a way that feels distinctly American and imperial, specifically in the ways the game developers use the representation of Las Vegas as a way to call attention to the imperial fiction of landscape—the artificiality of imperialism’s insistence that the desert is an empty space. New Vegas pushes back on that imperial fiction by the way it visually represents the land- and cityscape, utilizes factions to echo empires past, embodies possibility in ruins, and disrupts imperial narratives of straightforward progress. Moving West allows the Fallout series to excavate imperialism more than in any other game in the series.

In Fallout: New Vegas, players inhabit the role of the Courier, hired by the Mojave Express to deliver a Platinum Chip. At the start of the game, the Courier is shot by Benny, who steals the Platinum Chip and leaves the Courier for dead in the desert. Doctor Mitchell from the nearby town of Goodsprings patches them up and points players in the direction of New Vegas—
spared from the nuclear missiles that destroyed the other major cities of the United States—to find out more about the Platinum Chip that nearly cost the Courier their life and get revenge on Benny. On the way to New Vegas, however, players encounter various factions interested in claiming New Vegas and the Hoover Dam, a source of water and power—scarce resources in the Mojave Wasteland—and that the Platinum Chip is the key to a robot army that can be used to conquer the dam. The player can decide which faction, if any, to side with, completing various quests and encountering other groups of survivors building new lives or exploiting those around them. The game culminates in the Battle of Hoover Dam, where the Courier’s intervention decides the fate of the Mojave Wasteland. Because it is set in an alternate future Las Vegas, *Fallout: New Vegas* is a game that uses the landscape of both New Vegas and the Mojave Wasteland to highlight and subvert the history of American imperialism embedded in the earth.

*Fallout: New Vegas* is the fourth game of the *Fallout* series, a series of role-playing games (RPGs). The *Fallout* universe takes place in an alternate history timeline, in the 22nd century, after nuclear war has devastated the planet in 2077. Most of the population survived by retreating to underground bunkers created by the Vault-Tec corporation, who implemented various social and psychological tests. After the fallout cleared and people left the vaults, they

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4 I use the term “player,” similar to the reference to a reader of a text. However, “player” encompasses an active aspect of someone engaging with a video game, because of the role of player agency, especially in games where narratives are dictated by player choice, such as in *Fallout: New Vegas*. Jonne Arjoranta explains, “Understanding meaning as a cognitive response grounds meaning firmly in the cognitive processes of the player. Players are here understood as a more or less uniform group, with relatively similar cognitive processes. However, limiting the meaning in games to cognitive processes of a single isolated person does not do the concept. Instead, these cognitive processes should be seen as happening in a complex context of (social) relations, ultimately making meaning a contextual and social concept. The approach taken here leaves out all consideration for cultural differences, but assumes that such differences would exist” (699).

5 *Fallout: New Vegas* is technically a spin-off game, as it was developed by Obsidian rather than Bethesda, the developers of *Fallout 3*. Bethesda contracted Obsidian developers, many of whom were part of the first two *Fallout* games, to develop *New Vegas* while Bethesda focused on *Skyrim*. Some critics see many of the changes and features unique to *Fallout: New Vegas* stemming from Obsidian’s involvement in the project, especially setting *New Vegas* apart from *Fallout 3*.
began to explore and settle in the irradiated ruins of the United States. The series began with *Fallout: A Post Nuclear Role Playing Game* in 1999, and is considered the spiritual successor to *Wasteland*, a post-nuclear apocalypse RPG release in 1998. In 2008, *Fallout 3* incorporated many gameplay mechanics from the first two games—such as the karma system of morality, the character creation system, similar skill trees, traits and perks, and the ability to recruit non-player characters (NPCs)—though *Fallout 3* also changed combat from turn-based to first- and third-person perspective. Many of these mechanics set apart the series from other RPGs, utilizing systems like karma to track a player’s in-game “morality,” which reward the player for actions that helped other people like completing quests or taking away karma if the player murdered innocents, stole possessions, or sought bad outcomes to quests. Many fans of the series praise *Fallout’s* emphasis on story and world-building. Playing a *Fallout* game isn’t just wandering aimlessly through an irradiated wasteland and shooting enemies; it’s about exploring the environments, unraveling mysteries, interacting with NPCs, finding hidden caches of supplies, and discovering the many stories in the game, from the main story missions to the side quests, ranging from serious to zany.

Place figures heavily into the play and reception of the *Fallout* games. With recent games, fans have complained about the compression of cities and even entire states into a single map. *Fallout 3* is set in Washington, DC and *Fallout 4* takes place in Boston, Massachusetts. *Fallout 76*, with a bevy of other technical and design issues, is more ambitious than any of its predecessors because it is set in the entirety of the state of West Virginia. Many players have complained about the strange compression of space that occurs in order to present a playable version of the game environment. The reason so many fans and critics have fixated on

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6 For scholarship on *Fallout 3*’s use of city, see Johnson and Tulloch 243-256.
representations of place is because of the centrality of place in the series. The open-world RPG genre relies on a graphically generated landscape for players to explore. But, in contrast to similar games, *Fallout* represents “actual” places. The *Elder Scrolls* games are set in fantasy lands with names like Skyrim and Morrowind. *Grand Theft Auto* represents real cities but under different names—Las Venturas is Las Vegas, Liberty City is New York City, and San Andreas is Los Angeles—but often portrays these cities in realistic but hyper-exaggerated and satirical means.7

The criticism of representations of places like Boston and West Virginia highlight the limitations of video gaming as a genre, both in that there are technical restraints imposed by console systems and game engines and a realistically scaled map would take a player hours to cross. But, at the same time, these critiques are limited by envisioning video games solely as a medium of reproduction. Video games like *Fallout* do more than realistically reproduce facsimiles of real cities. They offer unrealistic experiences in stylized locations. Place and its representation, particularly its unrealistic representation, are one of the hallmarks of the *Fallout* series. *Fallout*, in contrast to series like *Elder Scrolls* and *Grand Theft Auto*, presents actual cities and familiar landmarks, but in a post-apocalyptic context. The cities are supposed to be familiar to residents yet markedly different; nuclear devastation has rendered buildings into ruins, inhabitants into monsters, and everyday commodities into relics.

Visually, representation of place is a major (if not superficial) distinguishing factor between games and indicates that *Fallout: New Vegas* engages with place and empire. Some fans complain that the aesthetics between games haven’t varied throughout the series, with landscapes rendering muddy textures and similar variations of brown color palettes. However, this means

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7 For further reading of video game cities and empire, see Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 153-182.
that screenshots of any of the games are almost immediately identifiable as *Fallout*, even as the series has branched across console generations and improvements in game engines. Vegetation is limited. The land has varying shades of desolate brown. NPCs have grimy clothes and faces. The Heads-Up Display (HUD), the display on the screen that let players track maps, health, ammo, is consistent across the later games. Many of the ruins and artifacts left behind have a similar 1950s retrofuture aesthetic. The appearance of the game is a uniting thread throughout the series. Though each iteration has a different story and location, the consistency in landscape emphasizes one of the main themes of the series, that war never changes, and nuclear apocalypse impacts different places in similar ways.

However, the Mojave Desert and New Vegas are distinct, especially from *Fallout 3*. The lighting of the Capital Wasteland of *Fallout 3* utilizes cooler tones, whereas the Mojave Wasteland uses warmer tones to depict a much warmer environment. Additionally, unlike Washington, DC and Boston, the Strip of New Vegas is mostly intact because it avoided many of the missiles that decimated the other cities. In fact, New Vegas is unique because the Mojave feels less like a wasteland and more like its original desert landscape. The desertification of the Capital Wasteland marks apocalypse. The Mojave Wasteland in *Fallout: New Vegas* seems to represent a kind of imperial fiction; there are times while playing that I wandered the desert between settlements. I could have been walking around the Mojave either presently or the game’s future. Imperialism depicts the land as an untapped resource, virginal, unoccupied, even as it is exploited and settled. However, when I approach the broken remains of a highway or the mutated, two-headed cows, I’m reminded of the nuclear devastation. Setting *Fallout: New Vegas* in a place with a history of atomic bomb testing and desert climate calls attention to the imperial fiction of the desert. The desert has never been fully devoid of life, in need of empire. Even after
apocalypse, the Mojave Desert is full of people rebuilding, returning plant life like yucca, Joshua
trees, and yellow paloverdes, and wild, mutated creatures occupying the hills. In fact, the Mojave
has survived nuclear devastation, the result of empires in conflict, and will continue to outlast
other empires as well.

The balance of familiar with unfamiliar is where I find richness in exploring American
culture in *Fallout: New Vegas* as a text. I draw from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s
conception of imperialism as “an extension of the sovereignty of . . . nation-states beyond their
own boundaries,” and focus on American imperialism specifically in this chapter (xii). The
balance of familiar with unfamiliar reproduces aspects of imperialism and removes it from its
current positionality, which argues that it has no borders across time and space. The familiar
elements of imperialism are displaced into an unfamiliar context—that of a post-apocalyptic
future—which challenge imperialism’s totalizing regime. Imperialism seems impossible to
escape from. In a statement attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, they say, “it is easier
to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.” Here I add imperialism to
capitalism, as the two are hand-in-hand.⁹

Even though *Fallout: New Vegas* reproduces aspects of imperialism, empire wasn’t an
overt focus in the game’s development. In various design documents released by Obsidian, the
developers focused on two main themes during in the initial development, “greed as a savage
force” and “rigging the game.” Greed is centered on the New Vegas Strip, a monument to greed

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⁸ See both Jameson’s *The Seeds of Time* and Žižek. Jameson, in a review of Rem Koolhaas’s *The Project on the City,* references the quote ambiguously before offering a revision: “Someone once said that it is
easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and
witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world.” See Jameson 65-79.
⁹ For a discussion of the relationality between imperialism and capitalism, see Hardt and Negri 229,
where they state succinctly, “The evils of imperialism cannot be confronted except by destroying
capitalism itself.”
and other vices, but also in the desperation of the factions to gain more territory. This theme even figures into the player’s choices, whether or not to double-cross people for a few extra caps. The idea of “the game is rigged”—a line spoken to the player at the start of the game—is also centered on New Vegas and the idea that “the house always wins.” However, rigging the game is central to the plot of the game, as each faction seeks a leg up on the other in order to seize the Hoover Dam. Whoever the Courier sides with can make or break a faction.

As development of the game’s story went on, the writing team organically discovered a third theme prominent in the final game: living in the past or embracing the future. Each of the factions hold onto nostalgia for some part of the prewar world, whether it’s the New California Republic (NCR) and American democracy or Caesar’s Legion and the Roman Empire. But this theme trickles down to even the NPC level. Many of the characters are haunted by their past and rely on the player to help them deal with their past and move on. These themes, though the developers didn’t set out to create a game about empire, inevitably tangle with the fiction and complexities of imperialism, especially when located in the Mojave, a site of American imperial expansionism. At first glance, Fallout: New Vegas imagines a world that, even after nuclear devastation, is still riddled with imperialism.

**Imperial Fiction in Fallout: New Vegas**

Imperialism engages in its own kind of fiction, a fiction that produces landscape as space in need of imperial intervention. Hardt and Negri conceptualize imperialism as different from empire, a global regime “with no outside” that is governed by capitalism and the world market rather than a single state (xi). They explain empire’s dominion comes from bringing together nation-states, multinational corporations, international organizations, and nongovernment organizations to create a network of power. However, I read similarities between their
conception of empire and my conception of imperialism. While American imperialism was centered on the United States as a nation-state, it similarly employed networks of power to extend the sovereignty of the US, not just into the frontier but also into time: “The concept of Empire,” like American imperialism, “is characterized fundamentally by a lack of boundaries: Empire’s rules have no limits. . . . No territorial boundaries limit its reign. . . . Empire presents its rule not as a transitory moment in the movement of history, but as a regime with no temporal boundaries” (Hardt and Negri xiv-xv).

Imperialism produces a conceptual narrative of itself, one that inscribes its aims onto the landscape to justify its own intervention. As Hardt and Negri describe, “This is where the idea of Empire reappears . . . simply as the fabric of an ontological human dimension that tends to become universal” (384). Imperialism seeks to expand past the constraints of time and space and instead pose itself as universal, indeterminate, and expansive. One place imperial fiction can be traced is in texts that challenge imperial nation-states, often by authors of color. I draw from Aimee Bahng and Mat Pat Brady’s analysis to inform a reading of Fallout: New Vegas centered on power and space; stories challenge imperial fiction by recontextualizing it outside of its own proposed narrative.

Aimee Bahng exposes this imperial fiction in Amazon rainforest, the site of colonial invasion and rubber production justified by depicting the tropical forests as empty and feral. She reads Through the Arc of the Rainforest, a speculative novel by Karen Tei Yamashita, as excavating the buried imperial histories and looking for alternative histories to disrupt the narrative of Western developmentalism. Mary Pat Brady, in her book Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies, highlights an urgency in Chicana literature of the the American Southwest because of the relationality between power and produced space. Brady especially emphasizes the way
Chicana literature critiques and contest capitalism’s attempt to formulate and regulate space, its uses, and its meanings. She also emphasizes the “produced” nature of space against conceptions of space as static and transparent, following the work of Doreen Massey, Edward Soja, and Henri Lefebvre. Rather than just a background to feelings and experiences, Bahng and Brady advocate for a perspective of space as affective, shaping feelings and subjectivities, especially in literature.

Imperialism runs deep in the history of the American West because of its employment of produced space. In her examination of Arizona, Brady traces how maps and ethnographic accounts of southern Arizona claimed the land. The history of Arizona is, inevitably, a history of empires, land, and the interaction between the two. Brady’s analysis spotlights several aspects of imperialism (closely connected to capitalism): the use of mapping and ethnography in othering; rationalizing, normalizing, and abstracting space; assimilating Arizona into the grammar of expansionism; and the land “begging” for colonization. Any work set in the West evokes messages of westward expansion, Manifest Destiny, and exploration, and that includes *Fallout: New Vegas*. The more players explore, the more of the map they fill out, finding new locations through quests or notes left behind, often rewarded with better loot or satisfying stories.

It seems that in *Fallout: New Vegas*, by encompassing American imperialism and other imperial impulses inherent to video games, imperialism is inescapable. Hardt and Negri

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10 Video games as a genre are imperial, commercial, and neoliberal. Video games have a history in the American imperial military industrial complex, when programmers at the Pentagon virtually produced military simulations and war games. Commercially, video gaming is an explosive industry, with games like *Fortnite* making $1.8 billion in 2019. Games are produced and consumed worldwide. As Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter observe, “video games are a paradigmatic media of empire” (xv). Additionally, the role of the player, often a single individual changing the world and fighting against waves of enemies, reeks of neoliberalism. Video games, on many levels, are a medium that reinforce imperialism by gamifying its fictions. However, games, like empire, contain kernels of hope. Video games as a medium, specifically the genre of open-world RPGs, offer a rich terrain to examine the fissures of imperialism because of the role of player agency in contrast to other texts usually in the domain of literary critics and cultural scholars. But, due to the technical complexity of many of these games, there is one other aspect of medium that offers opportunities for destabilization: the glitch. A
similarly argue that empire (like capitalism) appears inescapable but “is a parasite that draws its vitality from the multitude’s capacity to create ever new sources of energy and value . . . [but] endanger[s] its own existence. The functioning of imperial power is ineluctably linked to its decline” (361); while imperialism presents itself as all-encompassing, there are fissures in its functioning. I attempt to dig down to the fissures of imperial fiction in Fallout: New Vegas and glimpse the desert underneath. Fallout: New Vegas is a game about empire and place, especially when contrasted with its contemporary, Fallout 3. Though the two games were developed by two different studios, grounding Fallout: New Vegas in Las Vegas opened new opportunities for the game to “play” with imperialism, interrupting imperialism’s totalizing narrative.

**Factions and Inherited Imperialism**

New Vegas is a tense no man’s land between the NCR and Caesar’s Legion, both vying for control over the Hoover Dam, a vital resource of water and electricity. Other smaller groups similarly compete for territory. Each group attempts to expand and protect their own empires. Before the player begins, narration and cut scenes make it clear that the NCR and Caesar’s Legion are at a standstill, unable to overcome the other. But based on the player’s actions, one group can conquer the Hoover Dam, push back the other, and expand their empire. The main glitch or bug is when something goes wrong between a player input and the code and game engine of the game. A player’s interaction with the game engine tests the very mechanics of the game. When something goes wrong and players push beyond what’s possible in the game, there is a glitch. One of the legacies of Fallout: New Vegas is its many bugs and strange glitches. David Chandler reads the glitch alongside ruin in Fallout 3, focusing on the relationship between glitch and player in the already ruined space of the Capital Wasteland. However, I view glitches as potentially destabilizing video games and their imperial underpinnings. Glitches call attention to the constructed nature of the landscape. They add potential levity to serious situations. They disrupt the narrative progression of the game and sometimes refuse to let the player progress. But they also offer the possibility for glitching empire as well. So when players inevitably encounter glitches in Fallout: New Vegas, perhaps we can read these bugs not as mistakes but as disruptions, glimpses into engine, as features.
storyline of the game pushes players to take a side in the conflict and participate in that imperialism.

The most prominent feature *Fallout: New Vegas* introduces to the series is the faction reputation mechanic. Factions have been a part of the series since the first and second *Fallout* games, and many of the groups in those games return in *New Vegas*. *Fallout 3* had different factions players could complete quests for, but those quests didn’t impact the main storyline, which stuck to a more prescribed narrative. *New Vegas* differs from other games in the series by tracking a player’s standing with each of the factions. Faction reputation is especially relevant in the primary storyline of *Fallout: New Vegas*, which is driven by the interaction between the different factions. A player’s actions determine their standing among the other factions because each group has different values and motivations, which in turn affect the endgame. The reputation mechanic allows a player to become implicit in each faction’s brand of imperialism by helping their group or hurting their opponent.

The two main factions—the New California Republic and Caesar’s Legion—vie for control over the Hoover Dam and New Vegas. The New California Republic is organized around expanding “Old World” values—like democracy, personal liberty, free trade, and the rule of law—by annexing the Mojave Wasteland through military occupation. The Mojave Campaign started out as a series of missions to protect NCR citizens and trade caravan, but soon adapted to maintain control of the region and prevent Caesar’s Legion from pushing into the Republic. Caesar’s Legion, in contrast, is a totalitarian dictatorship and a slaver society seeking to expand their territory west and into the NCR, spreading their brand of security through repression.

Caesar’s Legion, the most obviously imperial faction, evokes the Roman empire in their appearance, military ranking, integration of Latin phrases in their dialogue, and their mission to
conquer the Mojave Wasteland. Caesar, the leader of the Legion, marks the connection between Rome and the Roman empire by speaking of the Roman Empire synecdochally. Rome the city represents the empire. Caesar, when asked by the player, will explain that he seeks to conquer New Vegas because then his “Legion will have its Rome.” He later discusses the Roman Empire’s imperial ideas but refers to the empire by Rome, its capital. Rome, according to Caesar, dedicated its citizens to something more—”to the idea of Rome itself.” Here, Rome means both the Roman Empire and its capital; the city takes on multiple layers as both capital of empire and representation of empire. New Vegas for Caesar, then, is the site of Caesar’s potential empire. New Vegas is not just another town to conquer and integrate into his empire. Rather, it is the site for his empire’s legitimacy, an actual urban capital to refer to synecdochally and center his empire. The city for Caesar is an instrument of war, a tool of his imperialist culture.

Caesar’s Legion is also a slave society; who they don’t kill, they enslave. Players can encounter a slaver in Cottonwood Cove with a few captured refugees. If the player asks Canyon Runner if it bothers him to sell people into slavery, he answers, "Why would it bother me to enslave these wretches? They have no purpose, no creed, no honor. They live in pitiful squalor, undisciplined, intemperate. To enslave them is to save them - to give them purpose, and virtue.” An underlying logic underneath Caesar’s Legion’s conquest is to unite the wastelanders and give them purpose under Caesar’s banner. If the player helps Caesar take New Vegas, the ending narration says, “The Legion pushed the NCR out of New Vegas entirely . . . enslaving much of the population and peacefully lording over the rest. Under the Legion's banner, civilization—unforgiving as it was—finally came to the Mojave Wasteland.” While the Legion’s methods are portrayed as brutal and merciless, many Legionaries see their imperialism as salvific. To enslave New Vegas is to save it. But Caesar’s brand of slavery has hints of American imperialism;
slavery allows Caesar and his Legion to expand their empire, harking to the enslaved people ignored and overwritten in American colonial history.\textsuperscript{11}

The New California Republic, on the other hand, is more underhanded in their representation of empire. Caesar formed the Legion around Rome and the Roman Empire because of its “was so foreign, so alien,” in contrast to the NCR’s return to “Old World American” values. One character, Colonel Cassandra Moore, when the player asks about the NCR, says, “I don't have time to discuss all the different aspects of the NCR with you, but if you want it all in a nutshell—the NCR is progress.” That progress, though it emphasizes rule of law, health care, and democratic governance, is able to progress through imperialism. Moore continues, “The NCR gives its citizens a shot at something more. We have laws, currency, health care, government. All the things that were lost. It's not perfect, but it's worth protecting, which is why we also have the largest military in existence.” By imperializing New Vegas, the NCR claims to bring aspects of civilization that it’s lost with the fall of the United States, such as rules of law and health care. In a sense, the NCR is restoring American empire to New Vegas American empire.

Both the NCR and Caesar’s Republic, as Arcade puts it, are attempting to “rebuild the new world in the image of the old,” but the means of rebuilding are grounded in Old World American imperialism. Hardt and Negri identify the United States, once “favorable to decolonization,” as assuming the role of “guardian of capitalism” and heir to an imperial world order. Decolonization allowed for a new global hierarchy, which the United States assumed. For Hardt and Negri, empire is not a single colonizing nation, but rather a broader set of structures of power that are maintained through colonizing nations like the United States. Imperialism, then,

\textsuperscript{11} See Gill, McKenzie, and Lightfoot for interdisciplinary work recovering and imagining the lives of enslaved people, even as historical records and accounts actively exclude them.
after the destruction of the world order in the world of *Fallout*, continued by groups who assumed command of and implemented those previous power structures. Arcade observes that “The NCR had a chance to [become humanitarians], but being imperialists mattered more to them.” The search for power and conquest extends imperialism to these post-apocalypse groups, even after any imperial nations appear to be long gone.

Implicit imperialism manifests through the language of landscape. For the NCR, borders are arbitrary markers, ones that the “light of society” can shine past. Similarly, imperialism is not limited to specific territories; wherever Californians stand, the NCR is carried there. What’s interesting is the language of light employed here in conjunction with the language of landscape. The physical landscape is implied in this quote, evoked by the term “borders,” implied in the ground where “Californians stand,” the wasted land to be illuminated. In contrast, however, the NCR’s imperial civilization is described as light, something that transcends borders and lights the land. It distinguishes itself from the landscape by being intangible and playing to the equivalence of light and progress against darkness and stagnation.

By reading *Fallout: New Vegas* through its representation of Las Vegas, particularly through the ways each faction views New Vegas and the Mojave, we see the echoes of inherited imperialism. Each group seeks to conquer the city and claim Hoover Dam in order to extend their territories and establish their faction as a totalizing presence in the region. Imperialism isn’t a civilizing force, bringing life to a desert devoid of it. Instead, imperialism, as it exists in the factions, relies on landscape to exist. The two main empires represented in New Vegas are both white, invasive forces seeking to “reclaim” land stolen from native peoples centuries before. Additionally, the player disrupts the totalizing, inescapable façade of imperialism because the factions, the vestiges of American imperialism, depend on the landscape and the player, not their
faction’s own dominion. They need New Vegas and Hoover Dam to solidify their empire in the Mojave Wasteland, and both factions rely on the player to help them claim New Vegas.

**Disrupting Imperialism and Embodying Possibility through Speculative Temporalities and Branching Narrative**

*Fallout: New Vegas* exposes empire in a different way than other games by grounding it in the Mojave Desert and New Vegas. Because of this, the game excavates the fissures of imperialism and allows us to imagine what Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd call the practice of “looking to the shadows” for “alternative histories and their different temporalities that cannot be contained by the progressive narrative of Western developmentalism” (5). New Vegas is one site of imperial fissuring. A city is a biopolitical space where life is organized, controlled, and exploited, according to Negri’s work of empire and space. Saskia Sassen sees cities as especially imperial, both because of a history of imperial order articulated in cities like New York, Paris, Tokyo, and London, but also because cities regulate accumulation and expansion, key activities of empire. These regulations create places of repression and blockage, such as walls that delineate where the poor can and can’t access and other forms of zoning, typically based on race and class. Negri’s description evokes gated communities, skyscrapers, and tourist-friendly pockets of sanitized urbanity against walls, slums, hostile architecture, and heavy policing presence.

New Vegas is, with Negri in mind, depicted as an imperial city. The Strip proper is comprised of only a few casinos, but the streets are clean, the people well-dressed in 1950s clothing, and players can even gamble away large quantities of their bottle caps (the in-game currency) through slots or card tables. However, the Strip is heavily regulated from the rest of New Vegas. A wall of scrap metal and barbed wire surrounds the Strip, making it difficult for a
player to sneak in. The only entrance is through a checkpoint guarded by robots. To get past, players can either submit to a credit check (which means they have to have at least 2,000 bottle caps), find or forge a passport, or attempt to hack or fight the guards. When the player first approaches the gate, however, they see a squatter in dirty coveralls attempt to run toward the gate, only to get shot down by the robots. The rest of New Vegas, referred to as Freeside, is as ruined as the Mojave Wasteland. People wear patchwork armor and rags. A group of children chase a large, mutated rat through the streets. Most of the buildings are run down or have collapsed entirely. Players are likely to be ambushed by thugs as they pick through dumpsters for spare caps. But Negri also stresses the city, a site of conflicting possibilities, as a place where the multitude can overthrow imperialism.

So how does New Vegas embody these possibilities? It depends on the player. The game, by offering a branching narrative and alternative speculative glances into the future, disrupts imperialism’s straightforward narrative of progress. The city isn’t the only realm for anti-imperial possibilities in the game. *Fallout: New Vegas* disrupts imperialism through its alternative futurity. Bahng highlights how speculation is a useful lens to examine imperialism because it allows readers “to revisit obfuscated historical moments that nevertheless continue to inform narratives of the present and the extrapolations of the future” (28). Speculation excavates and explores buried or impossible histories and exposes the fissures of imperialism by delineating its boundaries across space and time.

In *Fallout: New Vegas*, players travel to a future that is more than 250 years away. Even though set in a distant future, it is not largely unfamiliar, because the issues of this future are informed by our present. This retrofuture, a callback to 1950s mainstream American culture, draws attention to the simultaneity of our world and this alternate but parallel future. Kendall
Heitzman proposes that, in order to consider what parallel worlds tell us in science fiction, we have to understand how the narrative of the two worlds are constructed. In the novel *Gofungo No Sekei* (*The World Five Minutes from Now*) by Murakami Ryū, Odagiri Akira is transported five minutes into the future of an alternate dimension. In this parallel world, Japan resists the Potsdam Declaration that ended World War II. Instead, even after the fall of the military government and three more atomic bombs, the population resists underground in a massive network of tunnels. Heitzman, on the relationship between our world and its parallel, observes:

> If there is irony to be found in the novel, it is perhaps in the fact that the either/or of the parallel universe breaks down; this world and our own are twisted like a double helix. The war in that world continues, but the postwar we know from our own world is layered onto it. In this Japan as palimpsest—a new world mapped onto an older one both literally and figuratively—Odagiri experiences the present as something both new and nostalgic at the same time. (258)

The narrative’s structure, of Odagiri switching between two worlds, is mirrored in the player’s interaction with the alternate future of *Fallout: New Vegas*. While playing the game, the player exists in both the present moment and in the futurity of the game.

The case of Odagiri, oscillating between parallel worlds, mirrors the experience of a contemporary player interacting with *Fallout: New Vegas*; they essentially jump into the future of an alternate world. And, like *Gofungo No Sekei*, the two worlds—the world the player exists in and the world of *Fallout*—become mapped onto each other, like a palimpsest. The player’s present is the past of *Fallout*, experienced as part of the broader nostalgia for the past, whether in the retrofuture remains or the faction’s reshaping the new world in the image of the old. The present and the future are collapsed, “mak[ing] strange the universe in which we live [and
making] readers or viewers question the preconceptions under which we live our everyday lives” (Heitzman 254). Las Vegas is no longer just a city of glittering buildings and highways stretching into the desert, but instead become ruins, inhabited by people nostalgic for a past the player currently inhabits.

Many video games, especially in the open-world RPG genre, feature modern landscapes in ruins, because they “make strange” familiar landscapes. Emma Fraser, in her study of video games and ruins, sees urban ruin as integral to games’ embodiment of the kind of possibility Negri spoke of, a site of conflicting possibilities, one of which includes the multitude’s ability to overthrow empire. She says,

The experience of playing in the hypothetical ruins of a real city opens up a critical moment . . . . In video games, such sentiment is transferred to the player who wanders a (reasonably) open form cityscape in ruins, a space of urban alternatives and counter-spectacles which encourages players not only to observe particular images or aesthetics through familiar tropes and clichés, but to expose themselves to different ways of thinking and seeing the world around them. Such a mode of play may not have inherently critical import, but I would suggest that it has inherently critical potential, particularly through the implications of alternative futures or histories. (181)

In *Fallout: New Vegas*, the imperial aspects of the NCR and Caesar’s Legion are made apparent because the United States is in ruins. Because the Hoover Dam, leftover from American imperialism, is vital to supporting life in the region, the factions go to war over it. However, it is here that the imperial fiction slips, and players see through its façade; the Hoover Dam outlasted its imperial creator, and the factions need New Vegas more than the city needs them. The narrative is reversed, the fissures exposed, because New Vegas is in ruins, the familiar tropes of
imperial fiction and images of Hoover Dam and the desert made new. Somewhat ironically, instead of representing hopeless, the ruins of the prewar world—collapsed onto a player’s present—embody the possibility of disrupting imperialism.

Ruins disrupt the imperial narrative of progress by drawing attention to the fact that the end of empire isn’t the end of the world and by offering a chance to play potential futurities. Fraser also observes,

If nothing else, urban ruins are breaks in the teleological march of history, crumbling signifiers that reveal perpetual progress to be a fallacy, but also suggest that life and possibility persist in ruins, that the fall is not the last chapter. Even as a “dream of the apocalypse,” to play in ruins is to play the possibilities of the end, to indulge in counter spectacle, and to imagine—through the virtual—some alternative constellation of events, to envision situations profoundly different to those within which we find currently find ourselves. (192)

The branching narrative of Fallout: New Vegas similarly embodies various possibilities and disrupts the imperial narrative of progress. As mentioned above, the story of Fallout: New Vegas differs from that of Fallout 3. In Fallout 3, players followed a main storyline through the Capital Wasteland, tracking down their disappeared father and restoring technology that would purify the Tidal Basin and Potomac River. Though there are a few ways players can deviate from the story, the events proceed in a largely linear fashion. In contrast, Fallout: New Vegas allows for multiple endings and multiple variations within those ending, depending on quests completed and choices made in those quests. To quantify the difference between the two games, Fallout 3
has 59 total quests, whereas *New Vegas* offers more than one hundred different quests.\(^{12}\) Especially when compared to its predecessor, *Fallout: New Vegas* is a heavily authored game. Each choice offered to the player, each branch in the narrative, contains its own line of quests and generates certain responses from NPCs. Each line of dialogue for every possibility was written, recorded by a voice actor, and coded into the game. Whatever ending a player receives, the implications are communicated through a series of endgame slides and narration.\(^{13}\)

The branching narrative not only adds to the replayability of the game—players are encouraged to replay *New Vegas* and find quests they missed, side with different factions, and make different choices—but also disrupts imperialism, specifically the imperial fiction of straightforward narratives of progress. Bahng identifies the way speculative texts reject the developmental narrative of progress, ordered teleologically, by adapting cyclical structures to complicate the movement of Asian immigrants—not just a journey of leaving homeland, immigration, assimilation, success. Similarly, imperial fiction simplifies its narrative into a linear one of progress: the landscape is empty and purposeless until empire comes in and reforms the landscape, occupying it and using its resources to further empire. Progress purports continual, forward trajectory, the march of history from primitive cultures to globalized, enlightened societies.

However, *Fallout: New Vegas* disrupts the imperial narrative of progress by presenting a narrative branching in possibility, grounded in ruins, and ultimately cyclical. The branching narrative combats the narrative of progress, that the weaker empires fall to the mightiest.

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\(^{12}\) This number is limited to the quests in the base game, excluding bonus downloadable content (DLC), like Broken Steel and Point Lookout for Fallout 3 and Dead Money and Old World Blues for Fallout: New Vegas, which added to the total number of quests.

\(^{13}\) For more information on the various possible endings and their conditions, see www.fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Fallout:_New_Vegas_endings.
Because the player’s choice determines which faction wins the Battle of Hoover Dam, the game opens up the future and the endgame to multiple possible endings separate from the attempts of the factions to “colonize” the future. As Bahng observes, “Though often idealized as blank and empty, primed for projection and population, the future is in practice never so fixed or consolidated. . . . the future—or, rather, the endless multiplicity of futures—can never be fully colonized. . . . If it is to remain a space of possibility, the future must always also be a multiply occupied space” (13). The rhetoric of both the NCR and Caesar’s Legion sets the other faction as less sustainable and less progressive while positioning themselves as the only group able to “save” the inhabitants of the Wasteland and therefore colonize the future. But the two factions are evenly matched; the intervention of the player solidifies a faction’s victory. This means that the future is never fixed: it relies on the varying actions of the player, an ordinary person living within empire, to destabilize the imperial fiction of progress.

However, even with the branching narrative, there are common elements to each of the endings that further disrupt the teleological imperial narrative in favor for a cyclical conclusion to *Fallout: New Vegas*. The game begins and ends with a narrator repeating the phrase, “War never changes,” a theme throughout the series. At the end of the game, the player is shown a slideshow that describes their effect on New Vegas and the Mojave Wasteland, based on the player’s choices. However, the final piece of dialogue, no matter what the player chooses, remains the same: “And so the Courier’s road came to an end. For now. In the new world of the Mojave Wasteland, fighting continued, blood was spilled, and many lived and died—just as they had in the Old World. Because war, war never changes.” Even with the player’s intervention, there is no way to avoid the spilling of blood, which the narrator directly connects to the Old World, the world of imperialism. As players navigate the different quests and decisions posed by
the competing factions, it is clear the game avoids a simple good versus evil binary. In the end, though the player drastically impacts New Vegas and the Mojave, they can’t do anything to disrupt the looping pattern of imperialism; the game always ends with war.

Bahng argues speculative fiction can disrupt the teleological narrative of development underpinning imperialism by emphasizing the cyclical nature of those narratives. By complicating narratives, opting for cyclical rather than linear, Bahng highlights how the landscape of those stories “yields a propensity for messy mutation, not neatly packaged transformation” (36). “Messy mutation” seems fitting in a narrative about the aftermath of nuclear apocalypse. The various factions have splintered or reflect other imperial forms from the Old World, like American democracy and Roman Empire. No matter who takes control of New Vegas, there is no narrative of positive progression; each group provides some promise of advancement but often at the cost of others. We then see imperialism itself, not as neatly packaged transformation but as messily mutated, not as linear and rising but cyclical and spiraling. The only way to avoid continuing the pattern of imperialism is to not finish the game.

*Fallout: New Vegas*’s representation of Las Vegas, at first, seems like a messy mutation. It’s messy because of the unfamiliar set of politics dominating the region, with Caesar’s Legion and the NCR converging from the east and the west, and the many smaller, fractured groups fighting for a piece of the city. It’s mutated because of the extensive radiation permeating the landscape, killing the Courier if the player isn’t careful. The radioactive landscape invokes concerns over storing nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain and the potential ecological disaster. But there are many things about New Vegas that still feel familiar. The famous “Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas” has been repurposed to say, “Welcome to New Vegas.” But New Vegas,
because of its messy mutation instead of neat transformation, allows us to excavate fissures of imperialism and imagine Las Vegas as both a city reifying and defying American imperialism.
CONCLUSION

This thesis brings into conversation two very different texts, an ambitious, sometimes overly philosophical, and structurally complex novel and an open-world video game. *The Mirror Thief* spans three different time periods across three different cities. *Fallout: New Vegas* is set in a miniaturized, playable version of the Mojave Wasteland in an alternate future. *The Mirror Thief* subtly weaves magic into its story but was lauded for its realistic treatment of cities. *Fallout: New Vegas* intentionally created a timeline where its history differed from our own. Seay’s stylistic choices include using the present tense, fragmentary and incomplete sentence structures, omitting quotes in dialogue, and affected voice for each of the focalizing characters. Obsidian developed the game to be accessible to and understood by a wide range of players. Most folks had never heard of *The Mirror Thief* as I talked about my project, whereas *Fallout: New Vegas* is considered one of the best entries in the *Fallout* series. The two couldn’t be more different, thematically and generically.

However, I was drawn to both because of their wildly different depictions of Las Vegas. Growing up in Vegas meant an awareness that the city was “abnormal.” Normal towns had red brick houses with wood roofs, lawns and squirrels that lived in oak trees whose leaves changed with each of the four seasons. Las Vegas, on the other hand, had stucco houses with orange clay roof tiles and faux dry riverbeds in xeriscaped yards. I’d seen more squirrels in my first week of living in Virginia than I had my twenty years in Las Vegas. Water was a luxury, as we always seemed to be in a drought, and a necessity; I survived the long summers by making friends with families who had pools in their backyard. Slot machines were everywhere, inside McCarran airport, gas stations, and grocery stores alike. I oriented myself in Las Vegas valley through the Strip to the east and the mountains to the west.
The Strip occupies a huge role in cultural imagination but was merely a backdrop to my suburban childhood. Fredric Jameson, in his book *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, advocates for literary critics to take up postmodern architecture in their work. However, it’s clear he’s expanding his definition of postmodern architecture as beyond “commercial diversions” when he describes Las Vegas as “rainbow-flavor landscape of its psychedelic corporate monuments” (99). There were many references to Las Vegas in my research that echo this sentiment: Las Vegas is superficial, a simulation, a commercialized, Disneylandesque experience not worth reading and analyzing.

In this project, I am digging past the candy-colored casinos and claiming Las Vegas for literary criticism. *The Mirror Thief* and *Fallout: New Vegas*, while both feature the Strip prominently in their narratives, represent Las Vegas beyond the vices of the Strip. Las Vegas is more than the Strip; it is a city of multitudes, sometimes harmonious and sometimes dissonant, especially evident when posing *The Mirror Thief* and *Fallout: New Vegas* together. Earlier, in my introduction, I proposed that the storytellers of these texts aren’t just asking, “If Las Vegas is a message, what does it mean?” They’re asking a speculative question: “If Las Vegas is a message, what could it mean?” This thesis argues that these works, by grounding their stories in speculated landscapes of Las Vegas, expand Las Vegas beyond its stereotype as Sin City. Instead, the city is seen as historical. Though younger than many other global literary cities, its history buries obfuscated histories, specifically native histories, to return to Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd’s formulation. What appears superficial about Vegas only covers a history of those subsumed by American imperialism. Additionally, the desert is as integral to Las Vegas as the Strip—future studies could examine the displacement of Las Vegas from the desert, such as in J. G. Ballard’s *Hello America*, where ecological disaster transforms the American Southwest into a
lush jungle and the rest of the continental US into desert. In both texts examined in this thesis, Las Vegas is centered as a site of power, both of cultural and personal memory and of expansive imperialism. The sheer pervasiveness of Las Vegas as in image across science fiction and fantasy (my original primary source reading list included over sixty different texts) also marks this city as a literary, speculative city by inhabiting both the familiar American frontier and the frontier of the unfamiliar.
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